
Citation:

Sutcliffe, NMG (2010) The state of the art: development of the research degree in the UK: part 1. Assessment, Teaching & Learning Journal, 9. 34 - 36. ISSN 1756-8781

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The state of the art: development of the research degree in the UK

Nick Sutcliffe

Introduction

This is the first in a series of two articles which consider the evolution of the research degree from a historical and from a practice-based perspective, which will also consider the Leeds Metropolitan University context. This first paper charts the development of the research degree in the UK, while the second paper (to follow in a future issue of the ALT Journal) considers the implications of these developments, particularly their implications for supervisors, focusing on activities at our own University.

From a historical perspective, a useful starting point to begin thinking about postgraduate education is to consider the origins of the various degrees in the medieval university.

Originally the Bachelor's degree was the first step (*gradus*) in an academic apprenticeship in Law, Medicine or Theology. Completion of the apprenticeship led to the award of the Master's degree (*Magister*) whereas the early doctorates, as these evolved, can be likened to the professional doctorates of today.

There was no equivalent to the current research-based PhD and these degrees were first awarded in 19th-century German universities and later in US universities. The PhD degree took some time to arrive in the UK; the first PhDs were not awarded here until the latter years of the First World War, although other doctoral degrees such as DLitt, DPhil and DSc had been awarded in some English and Scottish universities in the second half of the 19th century (Simpson, 1983). The doctorate serves not only a knowledge generation function for, as Delamont et al (2000) conclude, "Doctoral research is a key stage in the socialisation of academics" (p.4) and as such, it is an important rite-of-passage for many academics joining the academy of scholars and became the norm for those intent on a university career, particularly one which focused upon research.

It was not until the late 1960s that researchers such as Rudd and Hatch (1968) began to look at the progression of research degree students and their completion rates in England. Their task was complicated by the fact that at the point when their study of the record began in the late 1950s, unlike today, most universities had no time limit for students completing their research degrees and so students who first registered ten or twelve years previously could be considered as being still 'active' in the returns that universities made to Rudd and

Hatch's survey. This masked a significant issue with progression which was brought into sharper focus later when the Research Councils, as the distributors of public funds to support research degree students, began to take a keen interest in this issue. There were also differences noted between disciplines, with students in the Social Sciences and Humanities typically taking more than ten years to complete their research degrees, while the Science and Engineering Research Council found that almost a third of students did not successfully complete their degrees.

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee noted in 1979 that many research degree students never actually submitted a thesis at all. A subsequent inquiry which led to the production of the Report of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils noted that drop-out rates and the proportion of candidates who did not complete their research degrees was alarmingly high (Leonard, 2001; Cowen, 1997).

The national response to failure

The early 1980s heralded a period of close scrutiny and increasing levels of accountability in the use of public funds; the Research Councils responded by tightening up their procedures and imposing sanctions upon departments which did not meet the desired research degree submission levels. For example, in 1987 the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC), following a commissioned report by the Winfield Task Force (Winfield, 1987), introduced a time limit for research degree submissions to university and polytechnic departments whose students were funded by the Council. This period was progressively decreased in subsequent years to bring pressure to bear on departments to encourage their students to complete their degrees within a four-year (full-time) or six-year (part-time) period. At the same time, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) proposed that a sector-wide taught element be introduced to research degrees with the intention of providing the necessary research training for students (Burgess et al, 1995).

Proposals for the introduction of a taught element alongside a research element to research degrees would give UK PhDs and similar research degrees a structure similar to those of research degrees in the USA, where a formal 'training' element in research methodology accompanies the traditional research-based component of the degree.

The increasing interest in the UK in quality assurance and accountability has led to an increase in the monitoring procedures associated with the completion of research degrees, and it is common to see monitoring of student progress done on at least an annual basis, if not more frequently in some institutions. The introduction of a training element to research degrees is underpinned by moves away from the traditional view of research degrees, certainly in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, as being a solo activity undertaken into an obscure and often arcane subject area towards a preparation for employment in industry or the academy. 'Fitness for

purpose' is now a key criterion in determining the successful completion of many research degrees.

At a national level, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), having earlier in the decade devised a qualifications framework for undergraduate and taught postgraduate work, is beginning to take an active interest in the nature and characteristics of doctoral degrees (Denicolo & Park, 2010; Bohrer, 2010) and Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of doctoral and sub-doctoral research and professionally-based degrees.

Table 1: The range of research degree and related awards

This table summarises some of the common target awards likely to be encountered in the UK. This list reflects a UK focus and is not intended to be exhaustive; however, many of the awards will also be common to other higher education systems, particularly those that are broadly similar to those in the UK.

Type of award	Format of the supervisory element
Taught Masters degrees with a dissertation (MA, MSc, MBA, MEd, MSocSci etc)	The dissertation element, usually towards the end of the course, usually takes the form of an extended piece of writing, usually (but not always) research-based, circa 12,000 – 15,000 words or equivalent
Masters by Research (MRes)	The dissertation is the principal output of this research-based award, usually circa 20,000 words completed in one year full-time or 2 years part-time
Master of Philosophy (MPhil)	This is a more sustained piece of academic writing, the end product being a dissertation of about 40,000 words or equivalent. It is normally completed by students in two years of full-time or four years of part-time study and is usually "a record of original work or an ordered and critical exposition of existing knowledge in any field" (NPC, 1995, p.3)
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD, DPhil)	For this award, the artefact produced is a thesis of approximately 70,000 – 80,000 words or equivalent. It is normally completed by students in three years of full-time or six years of part-time study. The PhD thesis "must form a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality, shown by the discovery of new facts or by the exercise of independent critical power" (NPC, 1995, p.3)
Professional Doctorate (DPharm, DEng, EdD etc)	The professional doctorate is distinguished from the 'pure' research often associated with the PhD in that it focuses on "innovation in the <i>application</i> of knowledge" (Leonard, 2001, p.71). It can involve a taught element and the output may be a thesis of circa 60,000 words or other artefact which must be at doctoral level standard

The key features which distinguish the work required to complete a research degree vary along three dimensions, namely:

- **Scale** – this usually relates to the written artefact and the word limits involved but it can in some cases be a non-written artefact (for example, a sculpture) submitted with an accompanying transcript
- **Scope** – this is really concerned with the breadth and depth of the investigation; for example, doctoral research usually requires evidence of ‘originality’
- **Time taken to completion** – this is notionally commensurate with the scale and scope of the task and is usually expressed in terms of maximum and (sometimes) minimum registration periods for research degrees. Where the dissertation element is a contained part of a taught degree, this can vary, often depending on the scale of the dissertation, but typically, this can take around six months, pro rata for the part-time equivalent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of research degrees has been a relatively recent phenomenon by comparison with other university awards. Their relatively complex nature, by comparison with taught postgraduate programmes, has made external scrutiny more challenging and made them harder to evaluate. However, during the later part of the 20th century investigations using ‘broad brush’ measures such as completion times, which were not direct measures of either quality or standards, have revealed significant concerns; currently national bodies such as the QAA are in the relatively early stages of developing a quality and standards framework for research-based degrees.

The second article in this series will concentrate on the responses of universities to the issues raised in this article and will use Leeds Metropolitan University as a case study for an investigation into the development of research student and supervisor training.

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